

James Baldwin at the National Press Club, December 10, 1986



James Baldwin (right) with Washington Post columnist William Raspberry (left) and CNN news anchor Bernard Shaw (center), December 10, 1986. Photo by Stan Jennings. National Press Club Archives

The novelist, essayist, playwright, and poet James Baldwin (1924-1987) delivered a lecture entitled “The World I Never Made” to a National Press Club luncheon gathering on December 10, 1986, at the beginning of a coast-to-coast speaking tour. The talk, broadcast over National Public Radio and C-SPAN, was one of Baldwin’s final attempts to present views on the meaning and impact of race in American life that the writer, as one of the nation’s most eloquent public intellectuals, had developed over a career that began in the 1940s. Baldwin, who would die of cancer one year later, suggested that the country’s current troubles with respect to the Reagan administration’s unfolding Iran-Contra scandal might be traced to the tendency of white Americans to make sense of domestic and international realities by relying on simplistic triumphal myths about their own identity and past that obscure a more complex history.

Baldwin conveyed a sense of pessimism for the country’s future unless white Americans would disavow a “European vision of the world” that is “obsolete.” He insisted that America was not a “white” country—the doctrine of white supremacy was imported from Europe, he avowed—and that until white Americans stopped expecting blacks to become “white,” the country would not be able to “grow up” and resolve its racial problems. America’s dealings with the wider world, Baldwin also warned, would depend on the extent that Americans would liberate themselves from the corrupting influence of popular culture images and language that have kept them from fully appreciating the history of American involvement in seemingly local occurrences such as apartheid in South Africa and civil war in Nicaragua. Confronting the reality behind

myths, a project Baldwin pursued throughout his long writing career, would be quite difficult he cautioned his listeners. United Press International reported that Baldwin's words caused "a dead silence to fall" upon the audience.

Many have characterized Baldwin as a prophet and preacher, a modern Jeremiah on a mission to save America through such confrontational rhetoric as he invoked at the Press Club. *Time* magazine referred to him as "a black Tom Paine." Refusing to celebrate the "progress" in race relations that many believed had been achieved during the last half of the twentieth century, Baldwin concluded in the 1985 introduction to the last collection of his essays published during his lifetime, *The Price of the Ticket*, "I do not feel, alas, that my country has any reason for self-congratulation." Basic structures of white power, he judged, had remained in place since he left the U.S. in 1948 to escape the damaging psychological effects of American racism. "There was not, then," he believed, "nor is there, now, a single American institution which is not a racist institution," an opinion he reiterated at the Press Club.

The roots of racial wrongs, he contended, could be traced to the ideology that motivated the founding Fathers. "These architects decided that the concept of Property was more important—more real—than the possibilities of the human being," he asserted. In the Press Club talk, Baldwin emphasized that profits made by those who benefited from slave labor and land stolen from the Indians were important historical forces ignored in popular culture myths that depicted the plantation "happy darkey" and in policy doctrines such as Manifest Destiny that justified and even mandated extermination in the pursuance of the nation's "civilizing mission." By "excavating" historical truths behind the myths, Baldwin maintained, Americans could undertake to create a new vocabulary to support a new worldview that stressed the true interdependence of peoples in the past, present, and future. "We live in a country in which words are mostly used to cover the sleeper, not to wake him up," he observed in 1962. Baldwin's insistence on the importance of language both for maintaining myths and for exploding them stemmed from the conviction he adopted as a writer committed to the exploration of truth, a calling that began in his youth.

Becoming a Writer

The oldest of nine children growing up in a poverty-stricken household in Harlem, Baldwin started to write at an early age. "I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read," Baldwin reminisced in a 1952 autobiographical essay that served to introduce his first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*. He received no encouragement from his stepfather, a stern and embittered preacher from New Orleans who "loathed" whites, as Baldwin told the Press Club audience. At his first public school, however, his principal, Gertrude E. Ayers, the first and only black principal in New York City until 1963, and his teachers fostered an interest in reading and writing, and encouraged him to peruse the collections of African and African diaspora materials of black scholar Arturo Alfonso Schomburg that had been acquired by the nearby 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library in 1926. Many of Baldwin's public school teachers "were survivors of the Harlem Renaissance and wanted us black students to

know that we could do, become, anything,” Baldwin later wrote, referring to the artistic and intellectual cultural nationalist movement that flowered in Harlem throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.

When Baldwin was ten or eleven, a “young, white schoolteacher, a beautiful woman,” he related in *Notes of a Native Son*, introduced him to the cosmopolitan world of art, culture, and left-wing politics. The teacher, Orilla Miller, “gave me books to read and talked to me about the books, and about the world: about Spain, for example, and Ethiopia, and Italy, and the German Third Reich; and took me to see plays and films, plays and films to which no one else would have dreamed of taking a ten-year-old boy,” he recounted in the 1976 book *The Devil Finds Work*. A member of the American Communist Party, Miller “tried to suggest to me the extent to which the world’s social and economic arrangements are responsible for (and to) the world’s victims,” Baldwin recalled. Besides stimulating his interest in artistic creation and world affairs, Miller served as a touchstone for Baldwin’s lifelong inquiries into the complexities of race. “From Miss Miller,” he reflected, “I began to suspect that white people did not act as they did because they were white, but for some other reason, and I began to try to locate and understand the reason.”

At Frederick Douglass Junior High School in Harlem, Baldwin received encouragement in his studies from two African American teachers, the acclaimed Harlem Renaissance poet, Countee Cullen, and Herman W. Porter, a Harvard-educated math teacher, who helped Baldwin run the school magazine. Cullen’s French class and experience living in France influenced Baldwin’s later decision to move there. Porter introduced Baldwin to New York’s great Forty-second Street Public Library, called “an important sanctuary during the rest of his school years” by Baldwin’s biographer, David Leeming.

Cullen convinced Baldwin to attend his own alma mater, DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, considered one of the top public schools in the city. Clinton hosted a male student body whose parents were predominantly Jewish, working-class, and left-leaning in politics. Interested primarily in English and history, Baldwin became an editor of the school’s literary magazine, *The Magpie*, to which he contributed stories, plays, and poems. At Clinton, Baldwin developed lifelong friendships with a number of students who worked on the magazine, some of whom achieved distinguished careers in literary and artistic fields, including publishers and writers Sol Stein and Emile Capouya, and photographer Richard Avedon, with whom Baldwin collaborated later in life on the photo-essay book *Nothing Personal*.

During his high school years, Baldwin also preached at a Pentecostal storefront church in Harlem. By the time high school had ended, however, Baldwin decided on a secular direction in life, as his Clinton yearbook indicated “Novelist-Playwright” to be his desired future vocation. He had, as he divulged to an interviewer years later, “abandoned Christianity as an organized religion,” yet maintained an attitude of witnessing that remained a core orientation throughout his career. “Every artist is fundamentally religious,” he believed. His experience as a preacher also proved to be

an important influence in the development of his writing and public speaking voice, as listeners to the Press Club talk might appreciate. Critics have called attention to the rhythms and repetitions in his prose, as well as his employment of illuminating narratives, rhetorical devices common to the black preaching tradition.

In 1940, Emile Capouya suggested Baldwin look up a painter Capouya recently had met, Beauford Delaney, who lived in Greenwich Village. Looking back in 1985, Baldwin considered the meeting with Delaney to be the real beginning of his career as a writer. "Beauford was the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist," Baldwin noted. "He became, for me, an example of courage and integrity, humility and passion." Delaney, Baldwin recalled, taught him to observe reality closely and to honestly confront disturbing phenomena. "He taught me how to see, and how to trust what I saw." At Delaney's studio, Baldwin listened to jazz and blues recordings, an experience he characterized as "religious" and "part of my inheritance." He especially admired the compassion he heard in the music. "I think I really helplessly model myself on jazz musicians and try to write the way they sound," he surmised.

Capouya also helped Baldwin to find a job in 1942 as a laborer at a defense-related construction site in New Jersey. In the new environment, Baldwin experienced the humiliating effects of racial prejudice at the workplace and segregation policies in operation "all over New Jersey, in bars, bowling alleys, diners, places to live," he related in *Notes of a Native Son*. "I learned in New Jersey that to be a Negro meant, precisely, that one was never looked at but was simply at the mercy of the reflexes the color of one's skin caused in other people." During the year in New Jersey, Baldwin keenly felt "the bitterness which had helped to kill my father" and recognized that it "could also kill me." Baldwin compared the effects of the experience to the contracting of "some dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels." He declared, "There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood." The realization that "once this disease is contracted, one can never be carefree again, for the fever, without an instant's warning, can recur at any moment," eventually would lead Baldwin to abandon the U.S. for Paris.

After his father died, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, where he initially found life "fairly rough" as a black man open to sexual encounters with both men and women. He was derided in public by gay bashers, who would later proposition him in private. He had affairs with white women who wanted to "civilize" him or humiliate their parents, and endured debasing teasing by effeminate gay men enthralled by myths of black sexuality. "In short, I was black in that world, and I was used that way," he averred. Invoking a title by the 19th century French bohemian poet Arthur Rimbaud, Baldwin portrayed the period as "my season in hell" and confessed "I was never able to make my peace with it." The example of Delaney, however, "operated as an enormous protection" against the dangers of drugs and despair common to the Village environment. Delaney "expected me to accept and respect the value placed upon me," he confided in a remembrance published in 1985. Baldwin also received support from the restaurateur Connie Williams, a Trinidadian who ran the Calypso, a hangout for an interracial group of musicians, artists, actors, writers, intellectuals, and radical thinkers,

where Baldwin worked as a waiter. Baldwin stated that without such support, he might have ended up a suicide like his close friend Eugene Worth, whose leap to his death from the George Washington Bridge Baldwin later fictionalized in his novel *Another Country*.

“To Tell the Truth”

Baldwin's professional career as a writer commenced during his years in the Village. Countee Cullen had remarked to him during an interview published in the *Magpie* that racial prejudice was virtually absent from the publishing world. “In this field one gets pretty much what he deserves,” he alleged. “If you're really something, nothing can hold you back. In the artistic field, society recognizes the Negro as an equal and, in some cases, as a superior member.” In 1944, Baldwin initiated a meeting with the writer Richard Wright, whose 1940 novel *Native Son* had won acclaim as “the finest novel yet written by an American Negro.” Baldwin's 60-page excerpt from an unfinished novel convinced Wright to recommend him to his editor at Harper & Brothers. Baldwin subsequently was awarded a fellowship from the prestigious Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Trust that Harper's administered the first of a number of grants and awards he received throughout his early years as a writer. He soon became acquainted with supportive liberals in the publishing world and beginning in 1947 published essays and book reviews in *The Nation*, *The New Leader*, *Commentary*, and *Partisan Review*. His first short story to appear in a major publication, “Previous Condition,” was published in *Commentary* in October 1948.

In this early work, Baldwin often wrestled with questions of the writer's mission in terms that revealed an abiding religious orientation. In his first published essay, a review of a collection of short stories by Maxim Gorki, Baldwin called for “further and honest exploration of those provinces, the human heart and mind, which have operated, historically and now, as the no man's land between us and our salvation.” For his first significant essay that was not a review, “The Harlem Ghetto,” Baldwin worked closely over a six-month period with the editor of *Commentary*, Robert S. Warshow, “the greatest editor I ever had,” Baldwin remarked to biographer Fern Marja Eckman. Warshow, who had attended DeWitt Clinton a decade before Baldwin, forced him in the essay to confront the issue of anti-Semitism in Harlem. “That was the first time I realized that writing was not simply the act of writing—that it was something *else*,” Baldwin noted, “something much *harder*. Which is to tell the truth.”

Baldwin moved to Paris in November 1948. “I left America,” he recounted in 1959, “because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem.” Baldwin believed he had reached the limit of his tolerance for racial prejudice. “I was going to kill somebody or be killed,” he told interviewers in 1984. He also accounted for his departure in terms of the development of his literary career. His assignments up to that time had revolved around “one subject only,” he recalled. “So after two years I reviewed all those postwar ‘be kind to colored people,’ ‘be kind to Jews’ books—all 47,000 of them came across my desk—and I simply had to go and try to figure out what in the

world was happening to me.” Rather than remaining in the U.S. and “becoming *merely* a Negro writer,” he desired “to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them.” Baldwin would return to the U.S. periodically and in his later years referred to himself as a “commuter” rather than an expatriate, as he expressed in the Press Club talk. Although he would live outside the U.S. for much of his life, Baldwin’s writing remained focused intently on the American experience.

As an American in Paris, Baldwin fell under the spell of the writing of an earlier expatriate who also chose Europe as his home base, the novelist Henry James. Baldwin perceived that James, whom he thought of as “the greatest of novelists,” raised the question “which so torments us now,” he wrote in 1962, “How is an American to become a man? And this is precisely the same thing as asking: How is America to become a nation?” James, Baldwin observed, often focused on “a certain inability [of Americans] to perceive the reality of others.” This theme resonated with Baldwin’s own experiences. “Americans do not see me when they look at me, their kinsman,” he perceived. “The price they pay for living is to pretend that I’m not here, and the price they pay for that is not being able to see the world in which they live.” During the Press Club question-and-answer session, Baldwin made a similar analysis of American self-deception about race as he issued his moral challenge for Americans to re-conceive their national identity.

In the 1949 essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” he offered the first extended statement of his mature writing creed, one that evoked a modernist sensibility in revolt against Victorian sentimentality. “That essay was a beginning of my finding a new vocabulary and another point of view,” he told interviewers in 1984. He criticized “the cornerstone of American social protest fiction,” Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which he reread “compulsively” as a child, for depicting the slave only as a victim and failing to examine what led the novel’s white villains to commit the horrifying deeds portrayed. Stowe, along with recent writers of protest novels, such as Richard Wright, Baldwin argued, remained more committed to their “devotion to a Cause” than in using the novel as a liberating tool to get at truths about a complicated individual human being. “In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power to free us from ourselves,” he asserted. “It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims,” he stressed as he clarified his calling as a writer.

In “Many Thousands Gone,” an essay published two years later, Baldwin contended that “the Negro in America” as yet had been able only to “tell his story” through “his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it.” In this essay, Baldwin continued his criticism of the work of Richard Wright. Baldwin proclaimed *Native Son* to be “the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America,” but complained

that the novel isolated its protagonist from the black community and thus created a “climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father’s house.” As he worked on his essays of criticism, Baldwin also completed his own first novel, in which he sought to exemplify the new direction in literature that he advocated in the essays.

Go Tell It on the Mountain, published in 1953, took Baldwin ten years to finish. Some have compared the book to James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a work that placed the emergence of the nascent writer within a familial, religious, and social context. Partly autobiographical, the novel was structured around the 14th birthday of John Grimes, the son of a remote and embittered deacon of a storefront Pentecostal church in Harlem, with interwoven stories of family history in the South prior to the migration North. In a 1976 interview, Baldwin explained, “The point of the book, in a way, is what experiences shaped his aunt, his father, his mother. All of these lives were shaping John’s life. His choices are defined by things that have happened to other people, not him. Not yet. In short he’s walking into his ancestors’ lives and experiences.” The novel culminates as John experiences salvation while he lay on the threshing floor of the church during an all-night service, a scene that replicated a real event in Baldwin’s life, which he later recounted in *The Fire Next Time*.

For Baldwin, confronting difficult personal subject matter in fiction and in his essays was necessary for his growth as a human being and as a writer. “Obviously at some point in my life that was my situation,” he wrote referring to John’s experiences in the novel. “And in order for me to assess and surmount it I had to face it. That’s why you write any book, in a sense, to clarify something. Not merely for yourself. What I have to assume is that if it happened to me it happened to someone else. You have to trust your own experience, which is all that connects you to anyone else.”

In the collection *Notes of a Native Son*, published in 1955, Baldwin continued his quest to reach a wide audience through relating personal experiences. Instead of portraying himself as a victim of racism, Baldwin, in many of the essays, adopted an authorial voice that assumed a connection with readers regardless of race. Rather than “complaining about my wretched state as a black man in a white man’s country,” Baldwin recalled as he discussed the book, “I shifted the point of view to ‘we.’ Who is the ‘we’? I’m talking about we, the American people.” Biographer David Leeming believed that “*Notes of a Native Son* was the ‘making’ of James Baldwin in white America.”

The book’s successful reception was due also to Baldwin’s captivating expository skills. Baldwin’s high school friend, Sol Stein, then an editor for Beacon Press, had convinced him to put his best essays together in this collection. Stein, who then edited the book, has described the method that helped make the essays so riveting, one that might be traced in part to Baldwin’s association with the painter Beauford Delaney. Baldwin would employ “visual particularity to make us see the places and people he

was writing about,” Stein observed. “Once his reader was lured into the experience, Baldwin would let loose insights that were startling in their candor.” Literary critics also applauded Baldwin’s achievements. Granville Hicks called attention to his “ability to find words that astonish the reader with their boldness even as they overwhelm him with their rightness.” Irving Howe declared that Baldwin “has made the essay into a form that brings together vivid reporting, personal recollection and speculative thought.” Mel Watkins judged that Baldwin’s style of writing essays “set a literary precedent that would later develop into the ‘New Journalism.’”

Reviewers in the popular press hailed both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Notes of a Native Son* as harbingers of things to come. The *Washington Post* declared that in the novel Baldwin “points the way to a new kind of Negro writing—writing that will not be labeled ‘Negro.’ . . . His characters are real, not stereotypes, and their essential humanity transcends race.” The *New York Times* proclaimed the book a “beautiful, furious first novel.” *Saturday Review* considered Baldwin’s ability to convey interior worlds to be equal to that of William James and William Faulkner. Alfred Kazin rated *Notes of a Native Son* as “one of the one or two best books written about the Negro in America.”

Langston Hughes, a major literary figure of the Harlem Renaissance, admired Baldwin’s talent—“he uses words as the sea uses waves, to flow and beat, advance and retreat, rise and take a bow in disappearing,” he reflected in a review of *Notes*—but he believed that Baldwin’s skills had been employed more felicitously in the essays than in his fiction. Hughes, who saw in Baldwin the potential to become “a major contemporary commentator,” cautioned that Baldwin’s multiform modes of address failed to coalesce. “That Baldwin’s viewpoints are half American, half Afro-American, incompletely fused,” Hughes pointed out, “is a hurdle which Baldwin himself realizes he still has to surmount.”

During the decade that followed the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin published four additional books—two novels, *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*, and two books of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name* and *The Fire Next Time*—that secured his reputation as one of the nation’s foremost authors. The latter three titles became best sellers. While the novels explored dimensions of sexual experience rarely approached in American literature—homosexuality and interracial love—the essays, many of which derived from Baldwin’s travels throughout America as the civil rights movement gathered strength, continued to investigate race.

The Fire Next Time

In the summer of 1957, Baldwin had left Paris for the U.S. both in protest of the Algerian war and to participate in the civil rights movement. With a commission from *Harper’s* magazine, Baldwin traveled to the South for the first time in his life. He traveled to cities in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Arkansas, where he recorded the experiences and thoughts of blacks and whites involved in racial conflict. In 1954, the

unanimous Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* had reversed the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that had permitted segregated public facilities. In September 1957, as black students attempted to attend formerly all-white high schools, however, white mobs attacked and spat upon them. The poignant query Baldwin recounted that the mother of one black student voiced—"I wonder sometimes what makes white folks so mean"—echoed the question, Baldwin earlier had pointed out, that Harriet Beecher Stowe had failed to ask in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds."

Three and a half years later, in an essay published in the *New York Times Magazine* in March 1961, Baldwin called attention to "black discontent now abroad in the world" and indicated that in this country, "Any effort, from here on out, to keep the Negro in his 'place' can only have the most extreme and unlucky repercussion." After noting that nearly everyone with the exception of the black separatist Muslim movement, had been indicating that "a new day . . . is coming in America," Baldwin expressed the exasperation of many blacks that "this day has been coming for nearly one hundred years" and "there is desperately little in the record to indicate that white America ever seriously desired—or desires—to see this day arrive."

In *The Fire Next Time*, a work considered by some to be his masterpiece, Baldwin heightened his foreboding tone as he continued his analysis of race in America. The book was published in January 1963, one hundred years to the month after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. After trying to account for the growing popularity of the Nation of Islam, whose leaders foresaw an imminent "return" to rule of blacks and the total destruction of whites, Baldwin issued a prophetic warning. "The Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power," he acknowledged, "but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream." Baldwin rejected the Nation of Islam theology, comparing it to that of the Nazis. He contended, however, that "there is simply no possibility of a real change in the Negro's situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure."

Salvation for the nation, Baldwin insisted, could come about only through a frank reappraisal of white America's history and thought, "everything white Americans think they believe in must now be reexamined," he declared. Quoting W. E. B. Du Bois's well-known dictum that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," Baldwin added his own corollary: "Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality." He acknowledged that changing that political reality at present "is impossible," yet insisted that "we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation." Baldwin narrowed his address in his concluding remarks to a more select "we" than he had in the past as he issued a plea for action. "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world," he wrote. The alternative, he advised, would be dire: "If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment

of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water the fire next time!*"

The two pieces that made up *The Fire Next Time* had been published late in 1962, the longer piece, originally entitled "Letter from a Region in My Mind," in the *New Yorker* and the opening "A Letter to My Nephew" in *The Progressive*. *New Yorker* editor William Shawn later commented about the piece he published, "I would say that it was one of only two or three things that really caused a sensation during my time at the magazine." Baldwin, Shawn alleged, "was saying things that hadn't been said before. And everybody was talking about it." Political analyst Jeff Greenfield, then an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, reported to the *New York Times* that Baldwin had become "the most enthusiastically read" modern author on campus. "The savage fury of his polemic, added to the immediacy of his concern—the racial dilemma—has made him the most hotly debated contemporary writer at this school," Greenfield observed. In May 1963, Baldwin's picture graced the cover of *Time* magazine. The book made him an "internationally recognized writer," according to biographer Leeming. Mel Watkins stated that "Baldwin became the most widely read black author in American history."

Not all the reaction was positive. The *New York Review of Books* condemned his substitution of prophesy for criticism. Conservative William F. Buckley Jr., who named Baldwin "the Number 1 America-hater," castigated him for "arousing appetites that cannot, simply cannot be sated." In 1965, Buckley debated Baldwin at Cambridge University on the motion, "The American dream is at the expense of the American Negro." Baldwin's arguments convinced those assembled to favor the motion 544 to 164. In July 1966, Buckley charged that Baldwin's rhetoric in *The Fire Next Time* foreshadowed "the cataract of contempt for America" that he saw as underlying the nascent "Black Power" movement. Baldwin would soon speak out in favor of Black Power and support the Black Panther Party.

In the years following the book's release, racial tensions in many American cities erupted into some of the worst riots in the nation's history. In 1970, Baldwin remarked, "What I said has become true and I wish it hadn't. *The Fire Next Time* was written as a plea. The fact that it turned out to be true makes it very difficult to keep writing."

After *The Fire*

In 1972, Mel Watkins noted that "Riots, assassinations, the emergence of black power and the intensification of white backlash have attested to Baldwin's powers of divination." Reviewing Baldwin's new book-length essay, *No Name in the Street*, however, Watkins judged that "those same events may have rendered him an anachronism." Watkins reasoned that the arguments that Baldwin and Martin Luther King Jr., had invoked to persuade white America to change had been "instrumental in exhausting the dream of an effective moral appeal to Americans." In an era distinguished by the more militant and pragmatic rhetoric that had replaced King's and Baldwin's entreaties, Watkins wondered if "an eloquent appeal for morality" had become "irrelevant."

Baldwin's novels and nonfiction books published after *The Fire Next Time* rarely received praise from mainstream critics. Reviewing Baldwin's 1968 novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* for the *New York Times*, Mario Puzo characterized it as "a simpleminded, one-dimensional novel with mostly cardboard characters, a polemical rather than narrative tone, weak invention, and poor selection of incident." At the Press Club question-and-answer session, Baldwin remarked that because that novel had been so badly treated by the press, it had become his favorite.

Baldwin's standing in the mainstream press remained low during this period. The *New York Times* and the *Times* of London refused to publish an open letter Baldwin wrote in 1968 in defense of Black Panther Stokely Carmichael after the State Department took away Carmichael's passport. In 1973, *Time* magazine declined to publish an interview conducted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., with Baldwin and performer Josephine Baker, stating that the two subjects had become "passé."

In the two years prior to the Press Club talk, Baldwin experienced a revival of interest in his earlier work. A new edition of *Notes of a Native Son* was published in 1984 with a new introduction by Baldwin. In January 1985, PBS broadcast a film adaptation of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Baldwin informed a reporter, "I am very, very happy about it. It did not betray the book." His collected nonfiction writings, *The Price of the Ticket*, also appeared in 1985. Baldwin's first play, *The Amen Corner*, which had been first produced at a small theater in Howard University in 1955, played in London to packed houses beginning in the Fall of 1986. In June of that year, Baldwin, along with his friend, composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein, was named Commander of the Legion of Honor, one of France's most distinguished awards. French President François Mitterrand, in presenting the award, called Baldwin "a defender of human rights."

In recent years, the movement in scholarship known as whiteness studies, a flourishing, though contested field that has sought to denaturalize the term "white" as it has been applied to race, has drawn on Baldwin's writings for inspiration. Historian David R. Roediger, a pioneer in the field, has cited Baldwin's "deep and persistent inquiries into what it has meant to be white." Baldwin's "modest proposal," expressed in the question-and-answer segment of the Press Club talk, to institute a "white history week," coincides with the agenda that proponents of whiteness studies have instituted to trace the history of white identity in American history.

"The Only Real Sin Is Despair"

At the beginning of the Press Club talk, Baldwin remarked that the White House was in trouble, "which means we are." In the previous month, news stories had broken that the U.S. secretly had sold weapons to Iran in an attempt to obtain the release of American hostages held in Lebanon by a group that had ties to Iran. The deal had been consummated despite President Reagan's explicitly stated policy of not appeasing terrorists. Toward the end of November, Attorney General Edwin Meese revealed that money acquired from the arms sale had been diverted to Nicaraguan Contras, rebels

whom the Reagan administration backed in their fight against their country's left-wing government, a regime that had gained power following the fall of dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979 and had been recognized by the Carter administration. Beginning in 1982, Congress had passed a number of bans to prohibit the Reagan administration from providing military aid to the Contras.

When the first story broke, Reagan instructed the nation, "We did not – repeat – did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages nor will we." By the time of Baldwin's Press Club talk, however, the president had admitted the sale and the diversion of funds, but insisted that he had not been in full control of his administration's foreign policy. Poll numbers released the week prior to the talk showed that Reagan's approval ratings had fallen 21 percent from the previous month, the sharpest one month drop in presidential job performance ever recorded. On the day of Baldwin's talk, news headlines announced that 47 percent of the public thought Reagan was "lying."

Baldwin connected the crisis of confidence in the country's leaders with long-standing national identity issues. The nation, he avowed, is "a very complex country which insists on being simple-minded." He assessed the attraction of Reagan as deriving from the importance that many Americans placed on the virtues of sincerity and simplicity, a situation he viewed with unease. "As long as you're sincere in what you say, you haven't got to know what you're talking about," he pointed out. When immaturity also "is taken to be a virtue," he surmised, "we really do get representing us a post-adolescent who is almost 80 years old." In a 1986 interview with biographer Leeming, Baldwin similarly characterized the "white American" as "one of the most astounding examples of retarded adolescence in human history."

When asked to comment during the Press Club luncheon on the situation in South Africa, Baldwin alleged that the institution of apartheid "brings into question the real meaning of the civilizing mission" and contended that "South Africa implicates everyone in this room." Two months earlier, Congress had overridden Reagan's veto of a bill to implement stiff sanctions against the South African regime, thus ending the administration's policy of "constructive engagement" that had been instituted to replace the Carter administration's policy of "confrontation." In August 1985, Reagan had claimed that due to constructive engagement, South Africa had "eliminated the segregation that we once had in our own country—the type of thing where hotels and restaurants and places of entertainment and so forth were segregated." The statement provoked much outrage and two weeks later Reagan acknowledged that he had misspoke, though he continued to maintain that "there has been a great improvement over what has ever existed before." Journalist Lou Cannon, the author of a number of biographies of Reagan, noted around that time that "Reagan's basic problem is not credibility but a frequently superficial understanding of complex issues," a judgment in accordance with Baldwin's analysis.

Earlier in December, Baldwin traveled to Philadelphia, where a production of *The Amen Corner* was to be staged. When a reporter asked whether he still believed that writing could effect social change, Baldwin admitted that after the assassination of

Martin Luther King, Jr., "I had a great deal of trouble with that question – it took me a long time to believe again that writing really did anything." He came to realize, however, that "the only way you can do it in the first place is as an act of faith. . . . The time of any artist – the time of any person – is brief. But that does not mean that he or she doesn't have an inheritance which one way or another he is compelled to pass down the line. So you work in the dark; you work in your time. The only real sin is despair . . . and you try to tell the truth."

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*
National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, Library of Congress

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